

Getting Started with Prescribed Fire

Prescribed Fire is a powerful tool to improve pastures and rangelands. Fire is a natural component of native Texas ecosystems, and is also beneficial for native and improved grasses. In order to start burning, there are several steps that must be followed to ensure a safe and successful burn.

Before the fire:

The most critical part of any prescribed fire happens before any drip torches are lit and fire is on the ground. Laws and regulations must be checked, the area to be burned needs to be identified, firebreaks (or burnlines) must be made, a prescription written, county authorities and neighbors to notify, and people/equipment identified to have help on the day of the burn. At the same time, if there are livestock on the property, the area to be burned will need to be deferred from grazing so adequate fuels can build up. It is helpful to attend and participate in at least one (but hopefully more) prescribed fires ahead of time to experience how a good fire is run.

Classes and workshops on prescribed burning are held across Texas to train and empower landowners to use prescribed fire safely. Call your county extension agent or Texas Parks and Wildlife Biologist for more information.

During the Fire

Double check the weather and for any last-minute burn bans in the morning. Burn bans may be put on at any time by the county judge, so always verify before everyone arrives on-site. Similarly, the burn boss should monitor the weather leading up to the fire, and on the morning of the burn. Do not burn if the weather or any other factor is out of prescription.

Make sure you have all your personnel, equipment, and water you need. Light a test fire to make sure the fire and smoke are behaving as is expected in the burn plan. Ignite the fire and keep everyone in good communication while monitoring the progress of the fire. Patrol firebreaks to keep an eye out for escapes or spot fires—especially in problem areas. Before stopping operations, make sure there are no active fires or hotspots near the firebreaks.

It's also good form to serve food to your friends and volunteers at the burn—everyone appreciates a hearty meal after a good day's work. Whether it's brisket or sandwiches, making sure everyone is fed well will help keep morale high and friends coming back to help next time.

After the Fire

After everyone leaves, check the burn lines several times to make sure everything still looks safe. Take some pictures right after the burn, and regularly after that to help monitor regrowth. Talk to the folks who helped out on the burn—see if they have suggestions on how to improve the your next burn.



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Picture (above): A landowner ignites a headfire on a prescribed fire in Coryell County, Texas. Image credit—Chase T. Brooke.

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Do's and Don'ts Before you burn:

Do:

- Burn safely, under good weather conditions, and with sufficient help and equipment.
- Burn following a burn plan written specifically for the burn unit/pasture.
- Follow all local, county, and state laws and guidelines for conducting a prescribed fire.
- Invite friends and others to help.
- Have plenty of water on hand—both for drinking and the fire.
- Call the nearest dispatch office/VFD to let them know when and where you are burning.
- Keep your equipment in good operational condition.
- Keep your fire lines clear of fuel and debris.
- Notify your neighbors and anyone downwind.
- Keep up to date with training and knowledge.

Don't:

- Burn in a burn ban.
- Burn under red flag (hazardous fire weather) warnings.
- Burn if anything is out of prescription.
- Burn before sunrise or after sunset.
- Start burning without enough people and equipment to manage your fire.
- Leave the fire until it is extinguished and safe.
- Wait to call dispatch if the fire gets out of control.
- Smoke out roads.
- Have inadequate fire lines.
- Have brush piles near fire lines.
- Wear unsuitable clothing (short sleeves, synthetic materials, etc...).
- Burn alone.

Additional Resources:

- Texas Prescribed Burn Handbook (agrilife.org/rxburn)
- Texas Dept. of Agriculture Burn Board (<http://www.agr.state.tx.us/pesticide/burnboard/pes-pbbmain.html>)
- Prescribed Burn Alliance of Texas (pbatexas.org)
- Texas Parks and Wildlife Burn Plan Template (https://tpwd.texas.gov/publications/pwdforms/media/pwd_1396_w7000_prescribed_fire_plan_private_lands.docx)



Photo captions: (Above) grass beginning to reestablish 2 weeks after a dormant season fire. (Middle) Lighting a test fire is important to make sure your fire and smoke behaves how you expect it to. (Below) Common farm/ranch equipment and vehicles can be useful for implementing a prescribed burn. Photos courtesy of Chase T. Brooke

